

## John Kurtz - Final

Hello, my name is Norman Olson. I'm a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee and a volunteer at the Service's National Conservation Training Center in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Today is Friday the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2005, its approximately 10:00 in the morning and this interview is being conducted at the Red Lion Hotel on the River in Portland, Oregon. We're here attending a meeting of the ... a reunion of the Association of Retired Fish and Wildlife Service Employee's. This morning I'm going to interview John Kurtz, who is also a retired Fish and Wildlife Service employee. John, would you please begin by giving us your full name and spelling it for us; telling us where you were born and raised; where you went to college and the degrees you received; and then where and how you got started with your career in the Fish and Wildlife Service.

JK Okay, my name is John Kurtz – K U R T Z – and I was born in 1935 in Whitewater, Wisconsin and after I went to school in a little town called Fort Atkinson and after I graduated from high school I joined the Navy and spent three years in the Navy. And then after I got out of the Navy I went to the University of Wisconsin for two years, going to be an engineer until I got to calculus and then I decided I wanted to be in wildlife and I ended up over in the University of Michigan then and I got my bachelors and master's degree at the University of Michigan. When I graduated I contacted Region 3 because that's the area that I was familiar with and talked to Forest Carpenter and he offered me a job as a laborer at Horicon Refuge until Jim Gillett moves, because he was going to be moving shortly, and as soon as he moved then I got to be the Assistant Manager at Horicon. I stayed at Horicon from '62 to '65 and then I moved down to Mark Twain Refuge where I was at the Louisa/Keithsburg Unit of Mark Twain Refuge for a couple of years and from there they talked me into going down to Crab Orchard in the Job Corp Program as work director, which was interesting and I was only there for about six months and they closed the Job Corp Center down and I got the job up in Kenai as the Assistant Manager at Kenai Refuge. While I was the Assistant Manager up there I was in charge of the recreation program on the refuge and I spent a lot of time out blazing hiking trails through the wilderness up there and taking groups out on camping trips to try to get support for establishing wilderness areas on the refuge and had a lot of fun.

NO Who hired you for the job at Kenai and what was the staff at that time?

JK Oh, the staff at that time was John Hakala, the Manager, and Bob Richey was the pilot/biologist and Bob Seemel was the Assistant Manager in charge of the forestry program and I had the recreation program and they had a couple of maintenance men that worked there also.

NO Okay, and what was it ... you lived then someplace between ... between Kenai and Soldotna?

JK Yeah, we bought a house halfway between Kenai and Soldotna.

NO Yeah, this is the ... this is probably the time after ... just after well Alaska had become a state, so I assume the Swanson River Oil Field and places like that were in the process of being developed and going into production?

JK Yeah, it was pretty much under production, pretty much developed, there was still some addition seismic work they were doing on the refuge and expanding it a little bit, but it had ... pretty much was operational when I was there. And it was a lot different then before the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field. We used to go up to Anchorage and, you know, Anchorage only had like 40,000 or 50,000 people in it at the time and it was a small town. A couple of stoplights in town and it changed tremendously after Prudhoe Bay.

NO Oh, I'll bet, I'll bet.

JK Everything in Alaska changed.

NO Yeah. What were Kenai and Soldotna like at that time?

JK Well, Kenai was primarily an oil town. The whole north end of town was all big subdivisions where the oil people lived and that's why we ended up going out the other side of town and lived out in an old subdivision that had more native Alaskans living in it. And one thing we thought was interesting; at that time there were very few old people that lived up. There was an elderly man in Kenai and there was only one grandma in town and she was grandma for everybody in town. People just couldn't afford to retire in Alaska in those days, it was pretty expensive.

NO I'll bet, I'll bet. Let's see, where did you go ... where did you go after Kenai?

JK Well, after Kenai, I left there in 1971 and got the job as Refuge Manager down at Umatilla Refuge on the Columbia River and I stayed there for nine years. And after that I went down to Phoenix, and I was in the Area Office down there and was in charge of the refuges in Arizona and New Mexico and got to see a lot of the Southwest which I had never spent any time in before. And they closed the area offices down and they asked me where I wanted to go and I said, "I wanted to go back to Alaska." And so they found a job up in Alaska for me in the planning section until Owen Vivian retired and then when he retired I was going to get the job as Refuge Supervisor.

NO You mentioned ... let's go back a few minutes here, you mentioned area offices. Now when you were at Kenai actually in the late '60s early '70s Anchorage was an Area Office of Portland is that right?

JK Yeah, Portland was the Regional Office and it was kind of an Area Office.

NO Who was in charge of the Area Office in Anchorage?

JK Dave Spencer.

NO Dave Spencer. Okay, and was there much of a staff in Anchorage at that time?

JK Like a half a dozen people, I don't remember who they all were but.

NO I wonder if Clay Hardy would have probably been there then?

JK I think Clay was working on the Amchitka Project at that time.

NO The Amchitka Project okay. Okay, so it was a very small office at that time.

JK Yes, Leroy Sowls was in there.

NO Oh, Leroy was there at that time?

JK Yeah, he was working on the Amchitka Project too. There were about a half a dozen biologists were working out on Amchitka.

NO Where was the Area Office at that time?

JK In Anchorage? Oh, it was on the old Seward Highway south of ... on the south edge of town, just south of what's now ... where the Sears Mall is in Anchorage. The Sears Mall was the south edge of town; there wasn't anything south of there.

NO Okay, and of course everything changed really with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in December of 1980. Alaska became a region at that point. Keith Schreiner was the first Regional Director I guess, so he would have been the Regional Director when you came back to ... back to Alaska in '82. You mentioned that you were ... you were involved in planning when you initially went up there, what was it that you were working on?

JK I spent about a year working on the Bristol Bay Plan which was a plan, I don't know who planned to make this plan, but anyhow, the whole Bristol Bay area all of the various land managing agencies got together and were going to try to get ... put together a long range plan for managing all the lands and waters of Bristol Bay area, which included the Park Service, BLM, the State Fish and Game people, the state public lands, all the Native Corporations and we had tons and tons of meetings and argued and argued about how we were going to manage different pieces of land. We finally got a plan put together and one thing that I can remember that was really interesting was we went down to Juneau to present this plan to the Governor, who was Bill Sheffield at the time, and when we got in there Bill Sheffield's secretary said, "Now Mr. Sheffield has a very short attention span so make this real short." And so we went in and gave our presentation to him and asked him if he had any questions and he came up with a question, "Well, what do you think we should do with sea otters?" And sea otters have nothing to do with the Bristol Bay Plan, you know, and he was a interesting governor I must say. (laughter) But somehow the whole plan just fell apart and it never was implemented.

NO You don't have ... you don't really have any idea what happened?

JK I don't know, just various agencies couldn't all agree on ... I think it was mainly nobody wanted to be bound by this plan, every agency wanted to do their own thing.

NO So as a result I think of that the refuges that were in the Bristol Bay area wound up getting plans ... as comprehensive conservation plans ... by the Service following all this.

JK Yeah, independently.

NO Yeah, independently. What were the refuges that were actually involved in the Bristol Bay Project?

JK There was Becharof Refuge ...

NO Alaska Peninsula?

JK Alaska Peninsula ... what's the one just north of there, up by Dillingham?

NO Oh, Togiak.

JK Togiak, yeah.

NO So those were the three refuges that would have been involved in it. Who were some of the other Service people that were working on that project when you were there?

JK I can't really remember.

NO I know we just talked a little while ago about Nancy Stromsen.

JK Yeah.

NO She was involved in that, she was like a public involvement specialist or public relations specialist or whatever. So I was just wondering whether there were a lot of other people in the Regional Office at that time who were working on it.

JK I don't think there were very many people. I know most of the meetings I was the Fish and Wildlife Service representative at the meetings that we went to and sometimes if we got into specifics about archeology we'd bring in the archeologists and, you know, the specialists that knew more about some facets of the program than I did, but ... but I was relatively new to Alaska at that time.

NO Oh, who actually did the writing ... putting together this ... this plan?

JK I think the state was primarily the one that put the whole ... all of the input from the various agencies together into a plan.

NO Okay, that's interesting. I'll have to talk to someone at some point who can figure out exactly what happened with all of that because when I got to Alaska in January of 1982 I knew that was going on, but I never really got involved with that because I started working on the Kenai Plan.

JK It was a really interesting exercise.

NO I'll bet, I'll bet. Yeah, I can see involving all those different interests ... all those different agencies that they would probably all want their spin on it, you know.

JK Yeah, you got the Native corporations involved in it too and then they've got their own agenda and it was quite interesting.

NO So how long did that last, working on that?

JK I spent about a year working on that, now I don't remember the exact dates, but it was about a year I think it was.

NO And then Owen retired?

JK Owen Vivian retired and then I got the job as Supervisor of the northern refuges in Alaska.

NO Who ... at that time what other staff was in ... the Regional Office had staffed up considerably and I remember there were a lot ... Dave Patterson and Bob Seemel ... there were a lot of people really in the Regional Office and Keith Schreiner was of course the Regional Director and Leroy I guess was the was his Deputy, is that right?

JK Deputy, yeah.

NO And Jan Riffe was the ...

JK He was the Refuge Supervisor yeah, I'd forgotten about him.

NO Yeah, Jan Riffe another interesting person and I was thinking of who his assistant was ... who the deputy was under Jan ... I mentioned his name a little while ago ... lives in Colorado ... oh, it'll come back to me. And Art Wemmerus I guess was there as the Chief of Planning.

JK Yeah.

NO Okay, when you became the Refuge Supervisor North what refuges were you ... were you responsible for then?

JK Togiak Refuge, Dave Stearns was the Refuge Manager at Togiak ... oh, not Togiak ...

NO Tetlin.

JK Tetlin Refuge, yeah, and Yukon Flats, and Lou Swenson was the manager there, and Nowitna, Jim Fisher was the manager, and Koyukuk Refuge, Mike Nunn was the manager there, and Selawik ... don't remember his name right now. (note: Kent Hall was the manager of Selawik)

NO It wasn't Jerry Strobele was it?

JK No, it wasn't Jerry.

NO Before Jerry, yeah, I don't remember who that was.

JK He quit the Fish and Wildlife Service and went and started his own charter boat down in the Juneau area I guess. And then Arctic Refuge and Glen Elison was the manager at Arctic Refuge.

NO Okay, there's one other refuge there too that was stationed out of ... Irv ...

JK Irv ... yeah, oh Kanuti.

NO Kanuti, Kanuti and Irv ... I can't remember his last name, was the manager there. (note: Irv Macintosh was the manager at Kanuti)

JK I know who you mean, I can see what he looks like, but I can't remember ...

NO That's terrible, we can't remember all these names. So Lou was ... Lou was the manager at Yukon Flats, so Red Shelton had departed at that time?

JK Oh, Red was still there for the first year or two I was ... yeah, he was an interesting individual too.

NO Absolutely, I worked closely with him and he was an interesting person too I think. Alaska's full of interesting people so ... so what were some of the kinds of things you got involved in as the Refuge Supervisor?

JK Well, one of the things of course we were just starting putting these refuge comprehensive conservation plans together for all the refuges and we had a lot of meetings with the various Native groups that were either in or lived adjacent to the refuge and there were quite a few really interesting meetings out in the bush in some of these Native villages with the local people. So we spent a lot of time working on these plans and another major thing that took place in the mid '80s was the 1002 studies up on Arctic Refuge and we had a whole herd of biologists stationed up in Fairbanks that were working trying to figure out what the impacts of oil and gas developments might be on the wildlife. And most of the biologists that worked on that were highly upset with the results of the studies because they were pretty much told this is what the results of the 1002 study is going to be and you make your data fit what the results are going to be. So it was kind of a political ... politicians decided what the results of the 1002 studies were

going to be and biologists had to try to manipulate their data and some of them quit because of that and others were working with Sierra Club and Audubon Society giving ... feeding them information that they shouldn't have been and it was a really interesting and highly political time. I took several groups of Congressman and Senators up in the 1002 area and showed them around and that was kind of interesting too. I remember one time we took them up there and we stopped at this ... flew into this lake and we provided fishing tackle for all of them and took them out fishing and one of the Senators, I can't remember which one it was, but he put on his hip boots and I told him to put the little straps around his belt and he said, "I'm not going to put those straps around my Gucci belt!" (laughter)

NO Oh, interesting times, yeah. I mentioned I interviewed Phil Garrett yesterday, or on Tuesday morning, and he talked about his experiences going out on the cat trains during that 1002-study era, going out with the oil company folks.

JK Yeah, I spent a week out on one of those cat trains doing seismic work and that was interesting. The oil companies tried to do a good job and leave no tracks and no trails and they were trying to do good work and no one knows what the results of all their seismic work was and ... but with the President we have now who knows what's going to happen.

NO That's true. What was it like out there? Phil sort of described that these were like mobil homes on skis and they were pulled by D9 cats and that sort of thing. What was it like being out there and living in those?

JK Well, they had really good facilities and good food and it got kind of cold sometimes when you were outside, but everything was done in the wintertime when there was snow cover and it was different from anything else that you ever want to do.

NO So you probably flew in to meet them and spent a week with them and then flew back out?

JK Yeah.

NO Did you go in on the supply planes or come out on the supply plane or was there some other?

JK I think a Fish and Wildlife Service plane flew me out and dropped me off, yeah.

NO Now that's interesting, when would that have been?

JK In the mid '80s sometime, I can't remember exactly when ... '85 or '86 somewhere around there.

NO Yeah, and that study ... that study then wrapped up and that report was sent to Congress, predetermine sort of, as you pointed out, and that went to Congress. What other kinds of things did you get involved with ... with the different refuges ... they were all different refuges and different managers?

JK Yeah, I don't know that there were any major issues or anything. I know we spent a lot of time going out and looking at various things in the refuges and decide ... trying to decide how we were going to manage this and how we were going to incorporate the things that the managers wanted to do into the comprehensive conservation plans so things would get done the way they were supposed to get done and lots and lots of meetings I know.

NO Oh, we mentioned Red Sheldon a little while ago ... that he was actually the manager when you started as the supervisor, he was an interesting person certainly.

JK Oh yes, I don't know what his background was, but he marched to a different drummer than most of us did (laughter) and he was real difficult to work with at times.

NO He could be, yes. I think he, if I remember correctly, he came from like Colorado Fish and Game or something like that I think before he came to the Service it seems to me. But certainly a very colorful person and still around I understand in Fairbanks. I talked with Lou Swenson not long ago and he said he sees him occasionally in Fairbanks so he's still around and has lost ... apparently lost a lot of weight because he was a fairly large guy, you know, at that time. And he always treats ... treats Lou apparently like a long lost brother you know, (laughter) although that's not exactly the relationship I remember going on there. Did the other refuges ... Arctic obviously was sort of the high profile refuge I guess during those years because of the 1002 interests and the Arctic coastal plain, the 1002 provision of ANILCA, which required that these oil and gas tests be done and that Congress determine whether it would be opened to oil and gas.

JK One of the things ... jobs that I seemed to inherit when I was Refuge Supervisor was any time a VIP from Washington or something would come along and wanted to see what Alaska was like, Bob Richey would fly the Goose and I'd be the tour guide and we'd usually take people from Anchorage up to Fairbanks and then go up to ...

NO Kaktovik?

JK Kaktovik, and spend a day there in Kaktovik, and then fly over to Selawik and then down to Bethel and then down to either King Salmon or Kodiak, depending on how much time they had and then fly back. So we got a lot of interesting trips, you know, some of the time we'd just land on a lake and set up our tents and camp out there and I remember we had some Congressman, I can't remember his name, but I took him around and I asked him if he liked to camp out or stay in motels or what and he said, "Well, roughing it to me is a Howard Johnson Motel!" (laughter) And so we had all different kinds of people and I remember once I had ... Jim Gillett came up there and we stopped at this lake and we were fishing and catching these Arctic char one after another. Just as fast as you could throw a lure in the water you'd catch another nice 20" Arctic char. And finally Bob Richey said, "Well, its midnight, don't you think we ought to get something to eat for supper?" And you know it stays light all night up there and so we just lost track of time and so we ate supper at midnight.

NO Oh, a little bit different from wintertime.



JK Yes, usually tried to stay in the Anchorage office in the wintertime.

NO Yeah, well if I remember when we were out in the winter basically sort of the flying window was about 10 o'clock in the morning to 2 o'clock in the afternoon in the interior and that was it, you flew then or you didn't fly.

JK Yeah.

NO Interesting time. Who was ... who else ... who else was in the Regional Office and I'm thinking now when you were the supervisor, of the hierarchy of the directorate itself. Who would have been the Regional Director and others then?

JK Oh, we had a couple of different Regional Directors, Keith Schreiner was the first one then Walt Stieglitz ...

NO And Bob Putz.

JK Oh, Bob Putz, I forgot about Putz and then I guess Stieglitz replaced him.

NO Oh, Gilmore ... Gilmore came in ... Bob Gilmore came in and then Stieglitz replaced him.

JK Yeah.

NO And the thing I remember about Gilmore was ... you talked about Governor Sheffield having a short attention span ... I remember with Bob Gilmore when you went in to do a presentation for him you had ten minutes and after ten minutes he was looking at the ceiling or underneath the table and he was just gone, you lost him. So he was the kind of guy you needed to get your points across real real quick or he was ... he was gone.

JK Yeah.

NO Interesting people.

JK Jan Riffe was a Refuge Supervisor for awhile and then John Rogers came in and replaced him and he stayed there until ... he retired about the same time I did I think.

NO And John was working primarily I remember on the Arctic nesting geese problems out in the Delta, that was his big thing really.

JK Yeah.

NO So I think his deputies quite often sort of ran the refuge programs, I'm thinking of Joe Mazzoni was certainly there and others who were there as well.

JK In the Refuge Division we had Art Wemmerus was in charge of the planning program, Bob Seemel was in charge of the wilderness studies ... I can see what he looks like the archeologist ...

NO Chuck Diters?

JK Chuck Diters was the archeologist and ...

NO Dave Patterson.

JK Dave Patterson was there and who was in the corner office?

NO Conrad Gunther.

JK Conrad Gunther, yeah.

NO And I think Bill Kirk was there, he was a botanist and Steve Talbot.

JK Yeah, boy you remember names better than I do. (laughter)

NO Well, I've been working on this stuff now for a few interviews and all this stuff is coming back to me, it's helping me a lot. With thinking about the structure with the Regional Office there was I remember sort of ... a lot of these people were in something that was called Resource Support, the office was kind of called Resource Support. I know Conrad had a number of people working under him, but Dave Patterson and Bob Seemel and a lot of these other folks were in Resource Support and I remember towards the end of when I was there in late '80s Gale Baker I think was in charge of that. She had originally been in Realty but had come out and gone into Resource Support. But I can't remember who was the ... who was in charge of that group, you know, before Gale and I've had a hard time ... was it Paul Schmidt perhaps?

JK No, he came in later as a deputy or John Rogers's assistant.

NO Yeah, that's right he replaced ... he must have replaced Joe then, Joe Mazzoni I believe.

JK I think so.

NO Okay, some other people ... some other names that come to mind George Constantino.

JK Oh, I think it was about 1988 they reorganized the Regional Office and instead of having a Refuge Supervisor North and a Refuge Supervisor South they combined it all under one where George was in charge of the refuge program up there and they abolished my job basically and gave me a job as ... the last year I was there I was ... what was I called? I don't remember what my title was, but anyhow, I worked pretty much exclusively trying to put the guiding program together on all the refuges.

NO Oh really.

JK I went to all the meetings with all of the guides all over the state and tried to get some kind of a uniform program for guiding on public lands in Alaska and that was real interesting. I got to meet some real characters in some of those guides; there were some interesting individuals out there. (laughter)

NO I'll bet, I'll bet.

JK That was real fun, because for the first time in my career I was given a job to do and I didn't have to worry about the phone ringing and someone calling me with some kind of a problem. I could focus all my energies just on that one project and I didn't get scattered from one thing to the next depending on which crisis was coming up now and it was kind of fun to just kind of kick back and actually do some work and well, produce some products. When you're Refuge Supervisor somebody's always calling you with what'll I do now problem and how do I handle this.

NO Oh, so that was the job you held then until you retired?

JK Yeah, I retired in 1990.

NO 1990. Okay, I guess that's when I left. I left in March I think of 1990.

JK I retired on my birthday and my birthday happened to be on the last day of a pay period and so I retired on my 55<sup>th</sup> birthday ... 55<sup>th</sup> birthday.

NO I'll be darned. Oh, yeah, I'm amazed at the number of people in the Fish and Wildlife Service who have spent virtually their entire career in the Fish and Wildlife Service and are eligible to retire at that relatively young age.

JK Yeah, I did, yeah. I retired when I was 55 and of course my military time counted, so I ended up with 32 years of government service, 29 of them were with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the government and 3 years with the Navy.

NO Yeah, see I retired 2 years ago at ... I was 62, but I only had 26 years in the federal service, but I had like 15 ... almost 15 years working, you know, for local governments, county governments or state governments. So I am amazed at the number of people who can retire in the Service at a relatively young age and still have a lot ...

JK Yeah, the last 15 years have been a lot of fun. I don't know how I ever got everything done when I worked for a living, because I can't keep up with all the things to do around the house now.

NO Boy, isn't that true, isn't that true. Yes. There was ... there is one other thing and if you'd like you could speak to it a little bit, but we talked about earlier. One of the things that I remember and I was peripherally involved in all of this because Art Wemmerus had moved from the Chief of Planning position into like a refuge operations position or something in this

Resource Support group in the Regional Office and instead of hiring a new Planning Chief, Pete Jerome and Leslie Kerr and I sort of shared the duties of the chief and we used that money to hire another person to work on the planning staff. And I can remember they finally advertised for the Planning Chiefs job and I applied for it and at the time there wasn't really anyone else that had applied for it and I happened to be working on the Koyukuk Plan at the time and I was out in Galena meeting with Mike Nunn and of course Jim Fisher's office was also there, and I can remember Jim and Mike lobbying me very heavily about the fact that there was this problem at Nowitna regarding a trappers cabin and Leslie Kerr and if I became the chief I would be her boss and I needed to discipline her over this problem. And I never quite understood everything that was going on with that, but while they were talking to me I happened to get a call from Anchorage and Mikel Haase called me to tell me that Clay Hardy had been made Planning Chief because they had abolished his position as the Special Assistant to the Regional Director for ANILCA and they needed a place to put him, so they made him the Planning Chief. So I went back into the room and told Mike and Jim, "Hey, I'm not involved with any of this stuff, you've got to talk to someone else!" (laughter) But there was this issue and I remember that was one of the things that came up while I was there and you would have been the supervisor ... Refuge Supervisor North at that time, is that right?

JK Yes.

NO And all I can remember is that it involved a trapping cabin and Leslie.

JK Well, what we think went on was that Leslie was basically in charge of putting together the plan for Nowitna Refuge and we found out, I don't know how we found out, but the refuge manager found out that she was apparently sleeping with one of the permittees on the refuge, one of the trappers on the refuge and staying out in his cabin and we didn't think it was appropriate for the person in charge of planning to be supposedly sleeping with one of the trappers or permittees on the refuge. And it got blown way out of proportion of course, and I remember going and sitting in on all kinds of depositions and ... but nothing ever came of it.

NO If I do remember correctly there was a provision also in the special use permit for the trapper that he wasn't allowed to have guests or visitors.

JK He could for a short time period or something.

NO Okay, I see.

JK Yeah.

NO Well, I always wondered about that and as I remember back I don't remember it getting resolved, but I mentioned to you that Charlie Blair, who was the Assistant Manager at Nowitna at the time, said that he had recently gotten some calls on all of that, so its interesting that this is still going on.

JK Still going on somehow.

NO Who knows.

JK I would suspect that the person that's been putting together or was responsible for putting together the plan shouldn't be involved anyway shape or form with any of the permittees on the refuge, it just wasn't appropriate.

NO Oh, speaking of these sort of ... these personnel issues, were personnel issues sort of something that consumed a certain amount of your time as the Supervisor North?

JK Not really, not really that much, everybody pretty much did their jobs and we didn't have any ... I can't think of any major issues except a lot of the biologists that were working on the 1002 study got a little disenchanted with the Fish and Wildlife Service for telling them how their biological research was going to come out, what the results were going to be, but I don't recall very many personnel issue up there.

NO Oh, well that's good news ... that's good news because they consume a lot of time.

JK Yeah, most of the kind of people that want to go out and live on a refuge out in the bush have to be pretty flexible people and they're, you know, easy going people in most cases, and it takes a special kind of person to want to live in those conditions.

NO Yeah, being the situation where these refuges and staff that you were basically responsible for in the northern part of the state were scattered all over did ... were people occasionally brought together for sort of joint meetings in the Regional Office or Fairbanks or something like that?

JK About once a year we'd all get together for a regional conference, otherwise it was pretty much I'd fly out to some refuges and meet with the refuge staffs and go over any issues they might have or do evaluations of how they were doing.

NO Thinking about Charlie, having interviewed Charlie just a couple of weeks ago, the situation where you've got a family with perhaps children living out in some of these bush communities, Galena or wherever it might be, were there any provisions made to get families back into Anchorage occasionally or did the government assist with that? Or if you needed to get back to Anchorage for something did you pretty much take a commercial flight in, to go to the hospital or see a doctor or something like that?

JK Under emergency situations the Fish and Wildlife Service would help families out, but for just going into Anchorage to go Christmas shopping or something that was pretty much left up to the individuals.

NO You were on your own.

JK Yeah. There were some problems with some of the families living out in the bush communities. I remember when Jay Bellinger was out in Bethel he had a daughter who was blond and the local Natives out there just harassed her continuously and I was working with Jay,

we were going to inherit her ... his daughter and have her go to school ... she was going to stay with us in Anchorage and go to school in Anchorage because she couldn't handle it out in Bethel. But then he got transferred to Kodiak before we ever had to do that. But blond ... young blond girls had a real rough time in some of the Native villages.

NO Is that right. That's interesting, wow.

JK But if you had dark hair it didn't seem to be much of a problem. But if they were blond they seemed to have a lot of problems. The Native girls picked on them terribly, that's where the main problem came from, the high school age ...

NO Yeah, I know Charlie mentioned that when they, you know, when they were ready to leave Alaska it was pretty much time to get out of Galena, they had young children and they wanted to get back to something that ...

JK Most people spend 3 to 5 years out in the bush and then they have to ... like to get back to civilization. I can understand why too. Some of those villages its pretty primitive living, like up in Kotzebue, Galena wasn't quite so bad, but it was still ... it was difficult ... you had to be a special person to want to live in one of those places.

NO Yeah, that's for sure. Having visited some of those places that's really true. Did you have a lot of interaction with members of the conservation community in Alaska while you were a supervisor?

JK Yeah, I used to meet with Jack Hessian, he was in the Audubon Society.

NO The Sierra Club.

JK Oh, Sierra Club ... he was yeah ... who was the Audubon person?

NO Dave Cline

JK Dave Cline, yeah. I met with them quite often and mostly just to share information.

NO Yeah, well they were certainly intensely interested in what was going on ... on refuges or parks or whatever and were constantly, you know ...

JK I remember after I retired I got involved with the local Audubon Society up in Anchorage and helped set up the Friends Program down a Kenai for the Friends of Kenai working with the Audubon and Kenai Refuge and some local folks, you know, that was kind of a fun thing to do after I retired.

NO You stayed ... you actually stayed in Anchorage.

JK We stayed up in Alaska for 10 years after I retired and before we moved down to Washington.

NO So you got involved with a lot of those things that were going on that were of interest to you.

JK Yeah.

NO Well, that's neat, that's neat. I know there were, you know, since I was the planner ... planning team leader on a number of projects that involved refuges that you supervised, Yukon Flats for one, I can remember there were some ... some things that we did that you got involved with, some workshops that we held and things of that nature, where you and Joe Mazzoni and Art Wemmerus and others from the Regional Office would get involved and the Flats is probably the one that I remember most and I remember we had a meeting down at the Rabbit Creek Inn ... Rabbit Creek Inn that we were looking at alternatives and things of that nature. But I can't remember you actually being that involved with Koyukuk and some of the other refuges, but that one I do remember. Did you ... did you get ...

JK Oh, I used to go to a lot of the planning meetings, particularly the ones ... the ones they had out in the Native villages either in or adjacent to the refuge, I went to quite a few of those but they were relatively ... maybe it would be the refuge manager and me and one of the planners and we'd go out and meet with the village elders and they were kind of informal meetings. But I did sit through a lot of meetings and they all run into one big muddled mess, I can't remember one from the other.

NO Yeah, but there were a lot of scoping meetings to identify issues early in the planning process and then public meetings actually when we had a draft plan or what have you.

JK It was kind of fun to go out to these Native villages and meet with the Native elders and, you know, discuss issues. I remember going into Yukon Flats, we flew into ... what was that Native village in the middle of the Flats?

NO Fort Yukon or Beaver?

JK I think Beaver maybe, it wasn't Fort Yukon. Well, we landed at the little landing strip there and a couple of guys came out in there full gear, their rifles and they said, "What are you here for and how long are you going to stay?" Some of the villages didn't like us coming into their town or villages and others we were welcome. It was kind of interesting.

NO Well, quite often when we would go to villages for meetings we would sleep in someone's cabin, on the floor in a sleeping bag, on the floor in someone's cabin and pay them, you know, for doing that and I do also remember times when people were kind of hostile, you know, "... what are you white guys doing in Indian territory," you know, "... what do you want ... what are you here for?"

JK Yeah, "... how long are you going to stay?"

NO Yeah, yeah, a little bit of that, but I remember generally people, most people were friendly, you know, unless they had been drinking, because when there was drinking going on ...

JK I remember once when I was up in Kaktovik they had a state trooper stationed there in Kaktovik and he came over to the Fish and Wildlife Service building there and said, "Lock the doors, a plane load of booze just came into town, so lock everything up, don't go out in the streets." And about two hours later he came back and said, "Okay, every things all clear, all the booze is gone, they're either drunk or in jail, one or the other." So when a planeload of booze would come into town it would get devoured instantly.

NO Oh yeah, when the bottle was opened you throw away the cork or the bottle cap and you didn't stop until it was all gone.

JK Yeah, you'd drink it till it was gone, you don't just have a social drink now and then, the Natives usually drink it all.

NO Yeah, that was one of the I think, depressing things about being in Alaska and being in the Native communities because you'd go to these communities, places like Beaver or Stevens Village or Birch Creek or Chalkyitsik or someplace like that, log cabins and very picturesque, you know, they look really nice and the people, like you say, were generally pretty friendly, but the minute there was alcohol involved it just changed.

JK Changed the whole atmosphere, yeah.

NO It really did, and that was always a little bit disappointing.

JK It was a big problem up there and probably still is.

NO Oh, I'm sure it is and I know that the alcohol ... or the suicide rate among young Alaskan Natives was pretty high too, much higher than anyplace else in the country. But I can remember a number of meetings where we would ... we would have to wait a couple of days, postpone the meeting until everyone had sobered up, you know, that was always interesting, or a flight came in with more booze and the meeting ended. (laughter) Yeah, so those were interesting times ... interesting times.

JK Speaking of that, I always remember when I was up in Kaktovik one time walking down the street and I saw the ... they had just harvested a whale there and they were butchering the whale and I was talking to the whaling captain and I asked him, you know, "How can you guys eat that muktuk?" you know, the whale blubber. I don't know how many people have ever tried eating it, but it's supposedly really good dipped in rancid seal oil, and I tried it once and its not very good. I asked him, "How can you stand to eat that stuff, it's terrible tasting." And he said, "Well, you white guys eat some strange things too." I said, "Like what do you mean?" And he said, "Well, I was just over in England at the International Whaling Commission Meeting and you know what they tried to feed me over there?" "No, what?" And he said, "They tried to feed me the leg from a baby sheep." (laughter)



NO Its all a matter of prospective I guess.

JK Yeah.

NO Interesting. Yeah, it was interesting when you'd get out into these communities, you know, we'd go to ... occasionally to the fish and game meetings, the ones that would go over the rules, what were they called? Gosh. Almost every ... every region had ... it was the state folks and the federal folks and then the local villagers, representatives from the village and they'd go over the regulations that were being proposed and all that sort of stuff.

JK I don't remember what they called those.

NO I don't know what they were called, but eating lots of interesting things caribou and other things that were ... moose ... that were pretty nice and salmon of course, it was interesting to be out there. So when you retired you stayed in Alaska for a while and you're now living down here in Washington.

JK Yeah, we live over near Spokane, Washington.

NO Okay, was it just time to leave Alaska?

JK Well no, three of our kids lived in Washington, one lived in Olympia and they had three kids; and then my daughter lived in Ellensburg and she had three kids; and then my son lived in Spokane and well, they've got four kids now, but they only had two when we moved down here. And we decided it was just getting too expensive if we wanted to see our grand kids to fly down all the time and so we decided to move down to Washington and be close to all our grand kids. And of course, as soon as we did that our daughter in Olympia moved back to Anchorage.  
(laughter)

NO Oh, really.

JK Now we don't see them very often, but at least all of the other grand kids are within three-hour drives, we get to see them quite often.

NO Yeah, go back to ... one of the things I think that's interesting is you got a chance to see Anchorage and Alaska over a fairly broad span of time from the late '60s early '70s through the 80's and now into the 2000s and pretty dramatic changes I guess?

JK Oh yeah, when we first went up to Alaska in '68 we drove up there from Crab Orchard Refuge and we spent three weeks just driving up there, which was a fun trip because we had four kids and the oldest one was five years old and the youngest one was just a couple of months old and we had a pickup camper and drove up 1,300 miles of gravel road, at that time, because the Alaska Highway wasn't paved. So we'd drive a 100 or 150 miles a day and when you've got young kids like that ... I checked out every fishing stream on the way up there and found there was some pretty good fishing to be had. But Anchorage was I think only 40 or 50,000 people

then and now there's like 250,000 people. And mostly all due to the Prudhoe Bay oil development and the oil pipeline and all that. It really changed after the pipeline was built, that was the main change in Anchorage. It's a major metropolitan city now.

NO Yeah, I was pretty amazed ... I, you know, was there of course in the '80s and then I got a chance to go back a couple times in the '90s and it just amazed me the amount of development that occurred just between the '80s and the '90s. I know lots of Super Kmart's and Wal-Mart's and stuff and it seems that way with a lot of development going in between the streets where there had not been development before.

JK Now even down on the Kenai Peninsula and Soldotna, when we were there in '68 Soldotna was a gas station and a post office and a little grocery store ... that was it. And now it's a major tourist attraction with hotels and motels and everything you could possibly want is there in Soldotna. It's really changed a lot.

NO Yeah, it's incredible. I can remember the first trips out into the Yukon Flats to do meetings there where the villages basically had no electricity. The only electricity was at the school and they had a generator, you know, but the rest of the village was operating on kerosene lanterns and what have you. And I can always remember going in the first ... first December ... or probably the second December ... second winter I was there ... going into Chalkyitsik and they had gotten electricity. And walking from the airport which was up on a hill and you walked down into the village and looking out over the village and it was just all these Christmas lights all over, you know, everyone had strings of Christmas lights on the outside of their cabins and they had electricity finally. But that was a big change, you know, got to see that in the beginning of the '80s, you know, where that changed village life and I'm sure that changed their life dramatically, getting electricity to all the cabins and things. That was an interesting period. Are you still involved in any of the refuge associations or groups at all?

JK Oh well, you know, I'm a member of all the various things and I come to these reunions, I got to the one in Spearfish and down here. Last winter my wife and I went down to Buenos Aires Refuge in Arizona and volunteered down there for four months in the wintertime. That was interesting and we really enjoyed it so we're going back again this winter and spend a few months down there. It was a lot of fun, we got to do ... we spent a lot of time taking groups of people on bird walks and working in the visitor center down there and they've got a wood working shop and I do a lot of wood working and I built a bunch of cabinets for their visitor center. It was a real relaxed way to spend the winter and the other volunteers that were down there were couples that are coming back. We had a lot of fun together and a real good group of people. And I know the refuge manager down there, when he saw that a retired refuge manager was coming down here to volunteer, the other staff members said he was real concerned about what was going to happen when this old retired refuge manager was coming to volunteer and then tell him how to run his refuge. But we got along fine. I didn't tell him what to do, most of the time. (laughter)

NO Are you a member of the Blue Goose Alliance?

JK Yeah.

NO Do you go to ... do they have regular meetings?

JK I've never been to any meetings, I just pay my dues and get some information about what's going on and other publications, but I haven't been actively involved.

NO Anything else you can think of that you haven't covered, that you remember about those days, that you'd like to add at this point?

JK Oh, I can't think of anything right now, but it was real enjoyable and we liked living in Alaska, it's a good place and I got to go some places that most people have never heard about.

NO That's right, yeah. Do you keep in touch with any of the people you worked with regularly, any of the people you worked with in Alaska?

JK Oh yeah, Dave Stearns who was the manager at Tetlin Refuge, we exchange Christmas cards every year and we go up to Anchorage ... we were up there a couple of months ago and we stopped to see Bob Seemel and he's still working at REI.

NO That's what he ... yeah, he tells me he's still working a couple days a week and doing a lot of physical stuff and he's lost some weight he said, he's slimmed down, so it sounds like he's in good health.

JK The last time I was in the regional office, right shortly after 9/11 happened and they wouldn't even let me in the building to go see who was there. Unless I had a specific person I was going to go see, you needed an escort you know. I used to stop in the regional office and harass them and tell them everything they doing wrong after I retired, but after 9/11 they tightened up the security so much you couldn't even get in the regional office up there.

NO Yeah, it's incredible. You've never done a tour in the Washington office?

JK No.

NO You stayed away from there.

JK I avoided that at all costs. I got back there for several meetings and I went to the I think it was about the first or the last Advanced Refuge Managers Academy back there and we were back there for like four weeks.

NO Toured the Hill and did all that sort of thing?

JK Yeah, and sat in many many meetings, but we toured around a little bit and got to see some of the refuges out on the East Coast.

NO Oh, yeah. Did you get back to Washington at all while you were a supervisor in Alaska?

JK Not when I was in Alaska. When I was down in Arizona, in Phoenix, I went into Washington a couple of times for various meetings, but once I got up in Alaska I didn't ... I don't think I ever went back to Washington. I tried to avoid it at all costs.

NO Okay. When I was at NCTC actually in the beginning of August there was a supervisors meeting being held at NCTC so all the refuge supervisors from around the country were there for a meeting on a new 500 point performance program that they're ... for accountability that they've initiated ... the Administration has initiated. But I did see Jerry Strobele was there and Mike Boylan wasn't there because he'd been out I think, on the boat, on the Tiglix someplace out in the Aleutians, so he couldn't make it. But I did see Jerry Strobele there and talk to him a little bit. And I don't know whether I mentioned to you or not, but I'm likely going to Alaska in March or April and probably spend a week in Anchorage and a week in Fairbanks to do interviews, oral history interviews with people like Bob Seemel and Fran Mauer and Glen, hopefully get to catch Glen, and Dave Patterson and a number of other people ... Lou Swenson.

JK You haven't interviewed Lou yet?

NO No, no, no, but I do ... hopefully when I get there in March or April he'll be on the top of my list and I've talked to him by phone and asked him about doing an interview. So I will hopefully be able to get to see and talk to a lot of the people we just ... we just mentioned who are still living, either still working in Alaska or are retired and are still living there, including some folks like Jack Hessian, it should be interesting to interview him and get his perspective on what was going on with ANILCA in the '80s and the D2 stuff before. So that's a trip I'm looking forward to and hope to get a lot of good interviews. So with that if there's anything else we don't need to add, we've talked about 57 minutes, so it was a good interview here, so with that.

JK Well, my memory isn't as good, I can't remember all of the various details and peoples names. I don't know, it must be the beginning of Alzheimer's I guess. (laughter)

NO Well, you're probably more cognizant of what was going on now than you might be in year from now, or two years, so we probably got you just in time then.

JK Yeah. Okay.

NO Well anyways, I would like to thank you John for sitting down and doing this interview this morning.

JK Yeah, it was fun.

N.E. Olson 7 July 2009